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ABSTRACT

As part of a 45-state study, a self-administered questionnaire was mailed during the 1982-83 school year to 70 of Oklahoma's 237 public K-12 school districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students; the questionnaire requested information about rural districts, teachers, students, and school programs. For the 45 responding districts, average student enrollment per district was 457 and mean student enrollment per school within districts was 170 students. Districts averaged 159 square miles in size. Agriculture and ranching ranked as major occupations and 56.8% of school patrons reported an average annual family income of $10,000-20,000. Districts averaged 15 elementary and 17 secondary teachers. Many teachers taught multiple grades (elementary) or subject areas (secondary), and the services of support personnel were limited, as were professional interaction opportunities. Average teacher turnover was estimated at 13%. Superintendents ranked their major challenges as obtaining adequate financial support, improving the curriculum, and securing qualified teachers. Districts averaged 33 graduates per year. Less than half of these graduates went to college or technical school. Special education was available in almost all districts but other support programs were less prevalent. Curricular and sports offerings varied across districts. A table compares all of Oklahoma's findings with those of the 45-state sample. (BRR)

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RESEARCH FOCUS ON RURAL SCHOOLS IN OKLAHOMA

Paper Presented at the First Annual Conference

Of the

Communities United for Rural Education

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By

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RESEARCH FOCUS ON RURAL SCHOOLS IN OKLAHOMA

By

Bruce Barker

It is generally agreed among researchers and practitioners in the field that teaching in a small/rural school is different from living in an urban area and teaching in a metropolitan school (Horn, 1981; Veselka, 1980). The purpose of this article is to report characteristics that appear common to small/rural school districts in Oklahoma, based on a recent descriptive study of the state's smaller districts, and to discuss implications of these findings for educators and those interested in education.

Research on Rural Schools

Although discussion of research and development needs for rural schools is becoming more prevalent, the state of knowledge and information currently available on rural education remains incomplete and startingly inadequate. The first National Seminar on Rural Education held in Washington, D.C. in May, 1979 recognized the need to collect, analyze, and compile data pertinent to rural education (Fletcher, 1979/80). Tamblyn (1977) indicated that one of the major tasks in the 1980's for rural education was the need to conduct "basic research on small school problems, practices, and unique features." Horn (1981) declared that one of the responsibilities facing universities is to conduct research and collect data on rural schools. Nachtigal (1979) specifically stated that descriptive studies are

needed on the operation of K-12 rural school systems with enrollments of fewer than 1000 students.

One difficult task encountered in discussing rural education is the problem of definition (Salmon, 1980). Rural education has been a difficult entity to define because the word "rural" has different meanings when viewed historically, statistically, or philosophically. Lack of a precise definition may be one reason rural education has received little attention in recent years. The concept of "rural education" varies from state to state and region to region. Both Texas and Oregon, for example, define a small/rural district as having fewer than 1000 students (Hearn, 1982). Since 1970, the U.S. Census Bureau has carefully defined the rural population as consisting of all persons living in places of fewer than 2500 inhabitants or in areas of extended cities with a population density of less than 1000 persons per square mile (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1970). The National Advisory Council on the Education for Disadvantaged Children uses the Census Bureau's definition to state that a rural district is, therefore, one having fewer than 2500 students (Special Report of Rural Education, 1979). The national Rural Education Association (REA) defines a rural school as one located in a rural area, using the Census Bureau's definition of the rural population, (CRESS NOTES, 1983/84). Based on this classification, almost two-thirds of all public school districts and one-half of all public schools in the United States are in rural areas. Furthermore, one-third of all teachers in the U.S. serve

predominantly rural constituencies (NCES, 1980). In Oklahoma, only 34 districts of the state's 601 independent school districts enroll more than 2500 students, and 237, (39.4%) enroll fewer than 1000 (Williams and Hughes, 1980). Oklahoma's districts of less than 1000 students enroll a combined total of about 140,000 pupils.

A Descriptive Study

During the 1982-83 school year, a self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 70 school superintendents selected from a random sample of Oklahoma's 237 public K-12 districts with fewer than 1000 students. Questionnaires were returned from 45 districts for a 64.3 percent response. Information was requested about the rural district, teachers, students, and school programs. Highlights of collected data are as follows.

District characteristics. The average student enrollment per district in the sample was 457 and the mean student enrollment per school within the district was 170 students. The typical district has only 1.3 schools, and districts averaged 159 square miles in size. Over one-half of the student body was bused daily to school and the average longest one-way district was 21 miles. Only 9.3 percent of the districts reported receipt of state aid or funding for small schools. The average size of the district's last bond issue was $364,837.

As expected, agriculture and ranching were ranked as the major occupations of those living within the school district boundaries. For most school patrons (56.8%) living in the district, the average annual family income was reported between $10,000 to $20,000, while 18.8 percent were in the $20,000 to $29,000 range. The range of family incomes

was from under $10,000 (10 districts) to over $30,000 (1 district).

Teachers and teaching. Districts in the sample were staffed by an average of 15 elementary and 17 secondary teachers. The mean teacher-student ratio was 1:14.4. Superintendents reported that only 11.1 percent of their secondary teachers were teaching in areas outside their area(s) of subject preparation; however, the mean number of different subject preparations for secondary teachers was 3.2. Furthermore, 39.9 percent taught four or more different subjects. In addition, 16.6 percent of the elementary teachers taught two or more grade levels in the same classroom. The average teacher turnover per year was estimated at 13 percent.

With regard to teaching in rural schools, problems associated with student discipline, such as cheating, vandalism, drugs, or alcoholism, were not recognized as prevalent problems by most rural teachers. On the other hand, students' lack of educational goals and direction as well as parental indifference to students' motivation were frequent concerns of teachers. Superintendents ranked the major challenges facing their school districts as (a) obtaining adequate financial support, (b) improving the school cirriculum, and (c) securing qualified teachers.

Students. Districts in the sample graduated an average of 33 students per year. Of these, superintendents reported that approximately three students achieved either ACT (American College Test) scores of 25 or above, or SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores of 1100

or higher. On the average, it was estimated that less than half (45.9%) of the schools' graduating seniors went to college or technical school.

School Programs. Special education was provided in almost all of the districts (93.2%). However, the services of a school counselor were not available in almost half of the districts (45.5%). In addition, 30 percent of the districts were not serviced by a librarian and 88.5 percent did not have the services of a school nurse. Less than 20 percent of the districts employed a school psychologist, adult education director, or community education director. A vocational education director, however, was provided in 29.5 percent of the districts.

Selected curricular offerings available in the small/rural school districts were reported as follows: vocational agriculture was offered in 83.3 percent of the districts; chemistry, 73.8 percent; physics, 50.0 percent; Spanish, 38.1 percent; computer science 42.9 percent; and calculus, 19.0 percent. The most popular sports programs offered in the district were basketball (100%); baseball (86.4%); track and field (59.1%); football (54.5%); softball (43.2%); volleyball (36.4%); and wrestling (15.9%). Soccer, golf, tennis, swimming, and gymnastics were offered in less than 15 percent of the districts.

Comparison to School Districts of Similar Size Nationally

The research finding for Oklahoma reported herein were part of a national study of rural school districts conducted by the author during the 1982-83 academic year. School superintendents from 642

districts across 45 different states participated in the national study. The focus of the national study was a descriptive analysis of K-12 or 1-12 districts enrolling 900 students or less. A comparison of the major findings in Oklahoma with those of the national study are reported in Table 1.

Implications for Educators

Findings from this study suggest that small school districts in Oklahoma face challenges which are not common to larger districts. Larger districts with more resources and professional staff are able to offer greater program depth and more activities. In comparison to other small school districts in the United States, relatively few small districts in Oklahoma receive additional state financial aid or funding to small districts. Also, the dollar amount of bonding is much less.

Administrators of small school districts in Oklahoma need to recognize that the primary parent occupation of the school attendance area continues to be agriculture, and that the income of most families falls in the $10,000 to $20,000 range, with many falling below $10,000. Prospective teachers assigned to small schools need to anticipate that the probability of teaching more subjects or multiple grades will be much greater when accepting employment in a rural school. More than one-third of the secondary teachers in this study taught four or more subjects. Due to the small size of school staffs, the opportunity to interact with other professional educators--particularly those in the

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TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN OKLAHOMA AND THOSE NATIONWIDE, ENROLLING 900 STUDENTS OR LESS. 1983.

Variable	Oklahoma	Nation
The Rural District		
1. Average student enrollment per district	457	436
2. Average number of schools per district	1.3	2.4
3. Average student enrollment per school	170.0	188.5
4. Average geographical size of district in square miles	159	245
5. Percent of student's bussed to school	54.5	64.4
6. Mean farthest one-way distance students bussed (miles)	20.7	19.0
7. Percent of districts reporting receipt of state aid or funding for small school districts	9.3	24.2
8. Average dollar amount of last bond issue	$364,837	$716,000
9. Percent of districts passing last bond issue	93.3	87.5
10. Percent of districts reporting declining enrollments	9.1	36.2
The Superintendent		
1. Average age of superintendent	46.9	47.1
2. Percent of superintendents holding master's as highest degree	64.4	55.4
3. Percent of superintendents holding Ed. Specialist degree	15.6	31.5
4. Percent of superintendents holding doctorate degree	20.0	13.1
5. Average tenure as superintendent (years)	6.0	8.5
6. Percent of superintendents reporting annual salary in excess of $35,000	47.7	37.4
7. Percent of full-time superintendents	97.8	75.8
8. Percent of superintendent/principal combinations	2.2	20.9
9. Percent of superintendents who worked for district prior to appointment as superintendent	31.1	29.4
The Teachers		
1. Average number of elementary teachers in district	14.8	14.4
2. Average number of secondary teachers in district	16.9	15.7
3. Average teacher/student ratio	1:14.4	1:14.5
4. Percent teacher turnover (1982-83)	12.8	8.6
5. Mean beginning teacher salary (1982-83)	$13,211	$12,492
6. Mean top teacher salary (1982-83)	$21,321	$20,506
7. Mean current teacher salary (1982-83)	$17,256	$16,377

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Oklahoma	Nation
8. Average number of "steps" to reach top of salary schedule	14.7	14.5
9. Average number of different subject preparations for secondary teachers	3.2	3.5
Student Performance		
1. Mean number of graduating seniors	32.9	34.5
2. Percent of graduating seniors recognized as National Merit Exam Finalists	0.7	1.0
3. Percent of graduating seniors achieving scores of 25 or above on American College Test (ACT Exam)	7.6	7.5
4. Percent of graduating seniors achieving scores of 1100 or above on Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT Exam)	1.1	2.6
5. Percent of graduating seniors going on to college	38.8	38.6
6. Percent of graduating seniors going to technical school	7.1	14.1
School Programs		
1. Percent of districts exploying either full or part-time, the following resource personnel:		
Special Education	93.2	86.6
School Counselor	54.5	79.4
School Psychologist	18.2	33.8
School Nurse	11.4	45.1
Librarian/Media Specialist	70.5	80.9
Adult Education Director	2.3	22.0
Community Education Director	4.5	7.8
Vocational Education Director	29.5	22.0
2. Percent of districts offering the following sports programs:		
Football	54.5	69.2
Basketball	100	100
Baseball	86.4	55.4
Softball	43.2	37.1
Volleyball	36.4	65.7
Cross Country Track	13.7	23.3
Soccer	0	7.0
Wrestling	15.9	25.2
Track and Field	59.1	78.7
Golf	13.6	22.4
Tennis	13.6	16.3
Swimming	11.4	3.2
Gymnastics	2.3	5.9

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	Oklahoma	Nation
3. Percent of districts offering the following courses as a part of their curriculum:		
Spanish	38.1	41.8
German	4.8	9.7
French	9.5	18.9
Calculus	19.0	35.9
Chemistry	73.8	79.4
Computer Science	42.9	60.3
Electronics	9.5	13.0
Vocational Agriculture	83.3	63.1
Physics	50.0	67.7

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same subject field--will also be more limited. The services of educational support personnel may also be very limited.

This study was conducted prior to passage of educational reform in many states resulting from recommendations from the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). Enactment of legislation with the intent of improving education will definitely impact smaller districts across the state, and research on the effects of that impact is needed. Additional research which focuses on enrollment trends, staffing needs, student achievement, curriculum, finances, consolidation, etc., will also provide educational decision makers with a greater awareness of Oklahoma's rural districts and an accurate assessment of the strengths and concerns of these smaller schools.

Oklahoma is one of the leading states in the nation in relation to the number of rural districts which make up the state's public school system. It is hoped that the information presented herein will assist Oklahoma educators, and others interested in education, to more knowledgeably enhance the strengths and address the needs of the small/rural districts within the state.

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